

**What Really Happened In The Thin Air**

**Climbers Who Were There Discuss the Events of May 10, 1996**

In the wake of the May 10, 1996 tragedy on Mount Everest, in which guides [Scott Fischer](http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/fischer.html) and Rob Hall died, emotions have run high. All told, eight people perished, making it one of the deadliest days in the mountain's history.

Journalist [Jon Krakauer](http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/letters.html#krakauer1) successfully climbed the mountain and subsequently wrote a major piece about that fateful day: "Into Thin Air," *Outside Magazine,* September 1996, which he later expanded into a book by the same title. His story has sparked a sometimes heated discussion about the events of summit day, even among other climbers who were on the mountain at the same time.

Predictably, the perceptions and memories of those who were climbing that day differ significantly. To further understand the complex situation and multiple factors involved in the deadly climb, The Mountain Zone presents here a forum for the exchange of opinions and views regarding the tragedy, expressly for those who were on Mount Everest when the surprise storm stuck with its deadly force.

Scott Fischer's guides [Anatoli Boukreev](http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/letters.html#anatoli) and [Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa](http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/letters.html#lopsang) responded to Outside's story, *Into Thin Air* by [Jon Krakauer](http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/letters.html#krakauer1), by sending The Mountain Zone their version of the events on Mount Everest. Krakauer, by email, subsequently addressed the points they raised.

Anatoli Boukreev

I am writing because I think John Krakauer's "Into Thin Air," which appeared in [the September, 1996 issue of *Outside Magazine*], was unjustly critical of my decisions and actions on Mount Everest on May 10, 1996. While I have respect for Mr. Krakauer, share some of his opinions about high altitude guiding and believe he did everything within his power to assist fellow climbers on that tragic day on Everest, I believe his lack of proximity to certain events and his limited experience at high altitude may have gotten in the way of his ability to objectively evaluate the events of summit day.

My decisions and actions were based upon more than twenty years of high altitude climbing experience. In my career I have summitted Everest three times. I have twelve times summitted mountains over 8,000 meters. I have summitted seven of the world's fourteen mountains over 8,000 meters in elevation, all of those without the use of supplementary oxygen. This experience, I can appreciate, is not response enough to the questions raised by Mr. Krakauer, so I offer the following details.

After fixing the ropes and breaking the trail to the summit, I stayed at the top of Everest from 1:07 PM. until approximately 2:30 PM., waiting for other climbers to summit. During that time only two client climbers made the top. They were Klev Schoening, seen in the summit photograph (pages 46-47) taken by me, and Martin Adams, both of them from Scott Fischer's expedition. Concerned that others were not coming onto the summit and because I had no radio link to those below me, I began to wonder if there were difficulties down the mountain. I made the decision to descend.

Just below the summit I encountered Rob Hall, the expedition leader from New Zealand, who appeared to be in good shape. Then I passed four of Scott Fischer's client climbers and four of his expedition's Sherpas, all of whom were ascending. They all appeared to be alright. Above the Hillary Step I saw and talked with Scott Fischer, who was tired and laboring, but he said he was just a little sick. There was no apparent sign of difficulty, although I had begun to suspect that his oxygen supply was, then, already depleted. I said to Scott that the ascent seemed to be going slowly and that I was concerned descending climbers could possibly run out of oxygen before their return to camp IV. I explained I wanted to descend as quickly as possible to camp IV in order to warm myself and gather a supply of hot drink and oxygen in the event I might need to go back up the mountain to assist descending climbers. Scott, as had Rob Hall immediately before him, said "OK" to this plan.

I felt comfortable with the decision, knowing that four Sherpas, Neal Beidleman (like me, a guide), Rob Hall and Scott Fischer would be bringing up the rear to sweep the clients to camp IV. Understand, at this time there were no clear indications that the weather was going to change and deteriorate as rapidly as it did.

Given my decision: (1) I was able to return to camp IV by shortly after 5:00 PM. (Slowed by the advancing storm), gather supplies and oxygen and, by 6:00 PM., begin my solo effort in the onset of a blizzard to locate straggling climbers; and (2) I was able, Finally, to locate lost and huddled climbers, re-supply them with oxygen, offer them warming tea and provide them the physical support and strength necessary to get them to the safety of camp IV.

Also, Mr. Krakauer raised a question about my climbing without oxygen and suggested that perhaps my effectiveness was compromised by that decision. In the history of my career, as I have detailed it above, it has been my practice to climb without supplementary oxygen. In my experience it is safer for me, once acclimatized, to climb without oxygen in order to avoid the sudden loss of acclimatization that occurs when supplementary oxygen supplies are depleted.

My particular physiology, my years of high altitude climbing, my discipline, the commitment I make to proper acclimatization and the knowledge I have of my own capacities have always made me comfortable with this choice. And, Scott Fischer was comfortable with this choice as well. He authorized me to climb without supplementary oxygen.

To this I would add: As a precautionary measure, in the event that some extraordinary demand was placed upon me on summit day, I was carrying one (1) bottle of supplementary oxygen, a mask and a reductor. As I was ascending, I was for a while climbing with Neal Beidleman. At 8,500 meters, after monitoring my condition and feeling that it was good, I elected to give my bottle of oxygen to Neal, about whose personal supply I was concerned. Given the power that Neal was able to sustain in his later efforts to bring clients down the mountain, I feel it was the right decision to have made.

Lastly, Mr. Krakauer raised a question about how I was dressed on summit day, suggesting I was not adequately protected from the elements. A review of summit day photographs will show that I was clothed in the latest, highest quality, high altitude gear, comparable, if not better, than that worn by the other members of our expedition.

In closing, I would like to say that since May 10, 1996, Mr. Krakauer and I have had many opportunities to reflect upon our respective experiences and memories. I have considered what might have happened had I not made a rapid descent. My opinion: Given the weather conditions and the lack of visibility that developed, I think it likely I would have died with the client climbers that in the early hours of May 11, I was able to find and bring to camp IV, or I would have had to have left them on the mountain to go for help in camp IV where, as was in the reality of events that unfolded, there was nobody able or willing to conduct rescue efforts.

I know Mr. Krakauer, like me, grieves and feels profoundly the loss of our fellow climbers. We both wish that events would have unfolded in a very different way. What we can do now is contribute to a clearer understanding of what happened that day on Everest in the hope that the lessons to be learned will reduce the risk for others who, like us, take on the challenge of the mountains. I extend my hand to him and encourage that effort.

My personal regards,  
*Anatoli Boukreev*   
Almaty, Kazakhstan

*Editor's note: Anatoli Boukreev was killed in an avalanche December of 1997 on a winter ascent of Annapurna.*

Krakauer's Response to Anatoli Boukreev

Anatoli Boukreev's letter to The Mountain Zone demands a response. As I wrote in "INTO THIN AIR," Anatoli performed heroically in the pre-dawn hours of May 11, and helped save the lives of Sandy Pittman and Charlotte Fox; I admire him immensely for going out alone in the storm, when the rest of us were lying helpless in our tents, and bringing in the lost climbers. But his behavior as a guide earlier in the day is troubling, and I continue to feel quite strongly that it needed to be addressed in print.

After speaking with Anatoli at length and on several occasions, the crucial facts remain indisputable: Anatoli elected not to use supplemental oxygen on summit day, May 10, and after tagging the summit he went down alone ahead of his clients, defying the conventions of responsible guiding. Why would a guide do this? Anatoli's explanation -- "I wanted to descend as quickly as possible to Camp IV in order to warm myself and gather a supply of hot drink and oxygen in the event I might need to go back up the mountain to assist descending climbers" -- betrays, at best, an alarming lack of judgment.

If Anatoli was concerned that his clients might run out of oxygen, why didn't he carry extra oxygen for them on the way up, instead of carrying nothing at all, not even a pack? He jettisoned his pack early on the climb, around 6:30 a.m., just above the 27,800-foot "Balcony." All the other guides on the mountain wore packs, in which they carried such items as rope, first aid supplies, extra crampons and clothing -- the things experienced guides typically carry to assist clients in the event of an emergency. Of the 30-some climbers attempting the summit on May 10, Anatoli was the only person up there without a pack.

If Anatoli was worried about dwindling oxygen supplies, why didn't he suggest to Fischer or Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa (when Anatoli met them on the summit ridge as Anatoli was descending) that they radio Camp 4 and request that Pemba Sherpa (who was waiting on the South Col in support for just such an eventuality) start heading up with extra oxygen? It is extremely difficult for me to accept that the most sensible course of action was for Anatoli to rush down alone ahead of the clients, then attempt to come all the way back up with a load of extra oxygen. Climbing to the summit ridge of Everest twice in a single day -- without relying on gas, in a raging blizzard -- has never been done in the history of mountaineering, and is probably beyond the abilities of any climber, even one as accomplished as Anatoli. I believe -- and some of his clients concur -- that the clients would have been better served if Anatoli had stayed and assisted them down the mountain. Anatoli did not have a radio (neither he nor Neal Beidleman were given radios; only Fischer and Lopsang carried radios among Fischer's team). Once he abandoned his crew, it was thus impossible for him to even know what kind of trouble the clients might be in, or know where on that huge expanse of mountain they might actually be.

In fact, at 6 PM on May 10, when Anatoli "gathered supplies and oxygen," as he describes it, and began his "solo effort in the onset of a blizzard to locate straggling climbers," he was able to climb no more than 600 feet above Camp 4 before becoming disoriented in the storm and being forced to descend back to the tents around 8 PM without locating anybody. This was a brave and noble effort on Anatoli's part, and is to be commended, but it was completely ineffective, and demonstrates rather dramatically what was wrong with his decision to descend ahead of his clients.

And even though Scott Fischer gave him permission to do so, does Anatoli really think that it was in his clients' best interest for him to climb without using supplemental oxygen? Anatoli is a remarkably strong climber at altitude, but he was paid $25,000 to perform as a guide, and oxygen would have certainly allowed him to think more clearly and assist clients much more readily. Or does Anatoli somehow believe that he is stronger without oxygen than with it?

Anatoli states, "In my experience it is safer for me, once acclimatized, to climb without oxygen in order to avoid the sudden loss of acclimatization that occurs when supplementary oxygen supplies are depleted." In truth, once acclimatized, any climber -- including Anatoli -- would be better off using bottled oxygen on a summit attempt and having it run out late in the day than not using it in the first place. The harmful effects of hypoxia are cumulative; the longer you go without oxygen, the more deleterious the outcome. If Anatoli doubts this, I suggest that he consult any reputable expert in high altitude physiology, or compare notes with such accomplished Himalayan climbers as Alex Lowe and Ed Viesturs -- who have demonstrated that they are at least as strong as Anatoli above 8,000 meters -- and wouldn't think of guiding without using gas.

Anatoli also states, "As a precautionary measure, in the event that some extraordinary demand was placed on me on summit day, I was carrying one (1) bottle of supplementary oxygen, a mask, and a reductor.... At 8,500 meters [approximately 27,800 feet], after monitoring my condition and feeling it was good, I elected to give my bottle oxygen to Neal [Beidleman], about whose personal supply I was concerned." This implies that Anatoli was doing Beidleman a favor by giving him this bottle. In truth, Beidleman -- who had a full bottle of oxygen at the time, and was already using his own perfectly functioning mask and regulator -- neither needed nor wanted Anatoli's bottle, mask, and regulator, which added approximately 10 pounds to the large load Beidleman was already carrying (by that point Beidleman was also carrying two coils of rope he'd taken from the ailing Lopsang, who, like Anatoli, was not using gas). In effect, Anatoli said to Beidleman, "Now that I know I'm not going to need this oxygen, you carry it for me, because somebody else may need it later." Anatoli was simply trying to strip his load down to the bare minimum, because he was climbing without gas and wanted every possible advantage in the horribly thin air above 27,000 feet.

In Anatoli's letter to the editor, he included his climbing resume. It is a very impressive tally of ascents, but there is a world of difference between being a brilliant climber and an able guide. Throughout Anatoli's defense of his actions he has implied that Scott Fischer fully approved of his guiding style. In fact, Fischer had repeatedly reprimanded Anatoli throughout the expedition for not sticking closer to his clients. On May 7, during Fischer's last satellite phone conversation with his business partner in Seattle, Karen Dickinson, he told her that he was furious with Anatoli for not fulfilling his responsibilities as a guide. The day before, on May 6, in the middle of the Khumbu Icefall, Fischer severely castigated Anatoli in front of one of their clients for being AWOL during a potentially life-threatening situation.

Many of us who were on Everest last May made mistakes. As I indicated in my article, my own actions may have contributed to the deaths of two of my teammates. Anatoli is an extraordinary Himalayan climber, and I don't doubt that his intentions were good on summit day. What troubles me, though, is Anatoli's utter refusal to acknowledge the possibility that he made even a single poor decision. Not once has he ever indicated to me that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't the smartest choice to climb without gas or go down ahead of his clients. Anatoli doggedly insists that he would make the same decisions all over again -- in his opinion, he was the only person on the mountain who did everything right. The rest of us fucked up big-time, but not Anatoli.

Such arrogance, I believe, is dangerous for any climber, but it is especially dangerous for one who purports to be a Himalayan guide.

Jon Krakauer  
August 24, 1996  
Seattle, WA

Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa

I am writing to you in response to the "Into Thin Air" piece written by John Krakauer, published in [the September, 1996 issue of *Outside Magazine*].

I came to Seattle, to attend Scott Fischer's memorial service. I was in Seattle 60 days before I ever talked with John Krakauer. During that time he wrote and submitted his "Thin Air" piece without once consulting me on what happened. Unfortunately, there were many false allegations made against me and my group that was led by Scott Fischer. Krakauer stated that a number of seemingly minor things omitted by us contributed to the disaster that occurred on the American and New Zealand Everest expeditions on May 10, 1996. There are many problems with this statement and I wish to address some of these. Also, negative references were made to my character and my abilities as Sirdar of the American Expedition. As you can understand, I would also like to clear up these errors made by John Krakauer.

My choice to summit Everest without oxygen was questioned by him. I have summitted Everest three times without oxygen, (not two as mentioned by JK), before this expedition and will continue to do so. I was requested to join a Japanese Expedition this fall and most likely will join a winter and spring expedition. On all of these, I will climb without oxygen. it was not mentioned that on Rob Hall's 1995 Everest expedition I broke trail and fixed rope without oxygen all the way to the summit. There I waited for one hour for other team members. No one came. Most regretfully, Rob Hall is not here to explain this.

Scott Fischer did not order me, nor did Sandy Pittman offer a "hefty" cash bonus to short-rope her to make it to the top. I made the decision to short-rope any team member who was having trouble. This was to ensure that all group members would have a good chance of making the summit. This was my goal, our team's goal. I worked very hard on this expedition. All members of my group would agree with this. I do not understand how Krakauer, involved in a different expedition could write statements that judge my work habits.

As far as being referred to as a "showboat," I have this reply. Just below the summit of Everest, I left my ice axe and a 15 meter rope fixed at a dangerous spot so that all remaining team members could get down safely. Then I waited for Scott to arrive. It was very cold. He finally arrived very late and we started down. Just as we reached my ice axe, Rob Hall and Doug Hansen were coming up my rope. So, after they got up to me, I sent Scott down and I waited next to my ice axe for them to summit and return so that they too could use my ice axe and fixed line to get safely down. Once they were safely down my rope, I then left and quickly caught Scott. From the South Summit I physically dragged him down until he could go no further. There I waited with Scott, determined to save him or die. Finally, he threatened me to save myself, saying that if I did not go down, he would jump to his death. I was the last person to leave Scott and Makalu Gau. (John states that three Sherpas were the last--also incorrect.)

In regards to the "Goldbrick" comment, you may wish to know that I netted two thousand dollars for this expedition, not to mention the fact that to save Sandy Pittman, I gave her my personal oxygen bottle on the way up, at 8,820 meters. I also carried an 80 pound load from camp 3 to camp4 the day prior to the summit bid, which included 30 pounds of other member's personal gear. I am not interested in money. I am my father's only child and I have many uncles and family. We help each other and live very well in Kathmandu. Money is not important for me. To be described or referred to as a "Goldbrick" is completely false.

In reference to the complaint about fixing the lines let it be understood that on all expeditions, whoever goes first from camp IV is supposed to fix the ropes. Rob Hall's group left 45 minutes ahead of us. In my group there were two guides who were paid considerably more money than me, Anatoli and Neal. That these strong, professional guides sat on the South Summit waiting for me to come up and fix lines for them seems ridiculous.

Krakauer makes references to my vomiting, making it sound like I was weak and unable to do my job. This too was greatly misunderstood. I have been over 8,000 meters many times, each time I vomit. It is just something I do. It means nothing. I have done it on all successful expeditions, when leading or following. I did it at camp I, II, etc. For me, it has nothing to do with altitude sickness. Neal Beidleman, who saw me vomit, also understood this, and took the ropes, which I was carrying, from me. He and Anatoli then took off in the lead. My job then became that of seeing to the rest of the group, making sure they got to the summit. This was my job. I in no way "lost sight of what I was suppose to be doing up there..." If Neal took the rope, then I assumed he would fix the lines. We were both guides. I would gladly have taken the lead and fixed the ropes if he wanted to stay back and help the others. Again, I was doing my job. I presumed that Neal and Anatoli were doing theirs. When I arrived at the South Summit, Neal and Anatoli were gone to the summit. If they had waited for me, I would have gone ahead and fixed the rope. This of course, made no sense due to the lateness. I mention this because Krakauer makes references that I was not willing to work hard on this trip; also completely unfounded. Also, if I was sick and weak, why would I wait so long on the summit for Scott, Rob Hall, and Doug Hansen? If I was sick and weak, how could I have spent 7 hours dragging Scott back down from the south summit?

My name was misspelled and my age misrepresented throughout the article. So you know, my name is Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa and I am 23 years old. Finally, I express my profound condolences to the families and friends of the victims.

Respectfully,  
Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa   
Kathmandu, Nepal

*Editor's note: Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa was killed in an avalanche in September '96 guiding another climb on Everest.*

Krakauer's Response to Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa

I regret if Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa feels that he was "singled out as contributing to [the] tragic events" described in my Everest article. He was certainly no more culpable than any of us who were on the mountain last May; indeed, it should be remembered that Lopsang was paid only about $2,000 for his services, while most of the western guides received between $10,000 and $15,000, and guide Anatoli Boukreev received $25,000. I apologize if my article somehow implies that Lopsang was more to blame than anybody else.

Lopsang has another legitimate beef with me as well: Although I did question him on at least three occasions before writing my article (on May 12 at the Yellow Band above Camp 3, on May 14 after the memorial service at Base Camp, and on June 8 at a memorial service for Scott Fischer in Seattle), none of these interviews was very fruitful. On May 12, for example, when I met an exhausted, emotionally devastated Lopsang descending the fixed ropes between Camp 4 and Camp 3, to all my questions Lopsang simply replied, near tears, "I am very bad luck, very bad luck. Scott is dead; it is my fault. I am very bad luck. It is my fault. I am very bad luck." It wasn't until July 25, when I had the opportunity to speak with Lopsang face to face for four hours in Seattle, that I heard his version of the tragedy in detail. And by that time my article had already gone to press.

Contrary to what Lopsang said in an earlier interview with ABC News in Kathmandu (recorded on videotape), during his long interview with me in Seattle, Lopsang insisted that Scott did not in fact order him to short-rope Sandy Pittman on May 10. In Seattle Lopsang also told me that he was not offered money by Pittman as an incentive for assisting her to the summit (Lopsang did express mild surprise, however, that he received "no money, no thank you, nothing" from Pittman after the expedition for the help he provided her). Lopsang explained to me that he made the decision to short-rope Pittman entirely on his own, "because Scott wants all members to go to summit, and I am thinking Sandy will be weakest member, I am thinking she will be slow, so I will take her first." The prospect of receiving money from Pittman, he assured me, in no way entered into his decision.

I thus stand corrected regarding Lopsang's motivation for short-roping Pittman. But the Seattle interview shed no new light on why he was helping Pittman in the early hours of May 10 instead of moving to the front of the pack to fix ropes according to the predetermined plan. Lopsang acknowledged that he left Camp 4 at the front of Fischer's group, carrying two coils of rope to be fixed, but claimed that there was no plan in effect for him or any other Sherpas to fix ropes ahead of the clients.

I feel obliged to point out that one important assertion made by Lopsang in his letter to the editor is directly contradicted by statements he made to me, recorded on audio tape, during our long conversation on July 25: In his letter Lopsang denied that he was "sick and weak" on summit day. Yet during our Seattle interview Lobsang told me, "Every mountain I climb, I go first, I fix line. In '95 on Everest with Rob Hall I go first from Base Camp to summit, I fix all ropes. But this year on summit day I am tired and sick because [the day before] I am carrying 80 pounds, maybe 75 pounds, from Camp 3 to Camp 4, I am carrying Sandy's telephone. I am also very tired because [on summit day] I take up Sandy together on rope above Camp 4. I am too tired, I vomit, so I tell to Ang Dorje [Hall's sirdar], you fix line. He says OK. I tell to Neal [Beidleman], you take ropes from me."

Another complaint Lopsang made in his letter also requires clarification. He wrote, "Krakauer neglected to mention that on summit day of Rob Hall's 1995 Everest expedition, I broke trail through deep snow and then fixed ropes from the south summit to the top. There I waited for one hour for other team members, who unlike myself, were using oxygen. No one else came." This is certainly true. But Lopsang failed to explain why no one else came: Due to the lateness of the hour, Hall had turned everyone around just above the South Summit. Lopsang, at the head of the line, ignored the turn-around signal and went on to the summit alone, infuriating the usually imperturbable Hall. As Lopsang was sitting on the summit, Hall, guides Ed Viesturs and Guy Cotter, and the other Sherpas were desperately struggling to bring two severely ailing clients (one of whom, Chantal Mauduit, was stone-cold unconscious) down from the South Summit, and would have benefited greatly from Lopsang's assistance. Hall admonished Lopsang sharply for going to the summit alone, and subsequently decided not to offer Lopsang employment in 1996.

Lopsang is an extraordinarily gifted climber, with the potential to be one of the world's foremost high-altitude mountaineers. I respect and admire him tremendously for staying with the dying Fischer as long as he did, at considerable risk to his own life. Lopsang would be an asset to any expedition; I would climb with him anywhere. But at the age of 23, with only four years as a climbing Sherpa under his belt, he still has something to learn about judgment.

Jon Krakauer  
August 29, 1996  
Seattle, WA

http://classic.mountainzone.com/climbing/fischer/letters.html